



## A Study of Negotiation in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Qinyi Yang\*

School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, 200000, China

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: 9 October 2020

Revised: 16 October 2020

Accepted: 24 October 2020

Published Online: 31 October 2020

#### Keywords:

White Teeth

Negotiation

Sequencing moves

Power relations

### ABSTRACT

This study examined the power relationships between male and female characters, between the white female character and women of color, and women of color's power relationship to each other in *White Teeth* through analyzing sequential moves in dialogues.

The exchange structure reveals that male characters are in dominance in their relationship with female characters, and female characters suffer sexual discrimination. It is also found that in their relationship to the white female character, women of color experience the discriminations of racism and classism, but they tried hard to battle against these discriminations. In addition, even within the community of women of color, women had to fight against oppressive stereotypes.

## 1. Introduction

**W**hite Teeth is the debut novel of Zadie Smith, an outstanding female British novelist who has a Jamaican mother. The novel, telling the story of three families living in northern London, depicts a world of racial mixing and immigrant changing. The Iqbals is the focus among the three families. Samad Iqbal is an ardent Muslim who has had an affair with his son's teacher Poppy Burt-Jones. In addition, he is an educated Bangladeshi who works as a waiter in a restaurant. His wife Alsana, also a Bangladeshi, does needlework at home. They have twin sons, Magid and Millat, who become increasingly differentiated as they grow up. Alsana decided to speak indirectly to Samad after he tore apart their family by sending Magid back to Bangladesh. Archie Jones, the closest friend of Samad, is an indecisive Englishman who works as a paper folder. His second

wife, Clara Bowden, is a Jamaican girl who ran away from home and abandoned her roots and religion. The Joneses have a daughter Irie, who has once lost herself in the multicultural London and later knows her roots from her grandmother Hortense Bowden. The Chalfens, descendants of white Jewish, are the representatives of the white middle class who hold prejudice towards the nonwhite. Their story is the epitome of the London society full of cultural, racial, gender, class, religious and political conflicts. And it cannot be denied that dialogues between the characters play a significant part in highlighting the conflicts.

It is in dialogues that the characters adopt and assign their roles to each other. According to Martin and Rose (2007), negotiation is the system that consists of resources that enables the to-and-fro of dialogue. By analysing negotiation, the power relation between the speakers can be revealed.

\*Corresponding Author:

Qinyi Yang,

School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, 200000, China;

E-mail: yangqinyi@sjtu.edu.cn.

This study attempts to investigate the roles assigned by female characters, the power relation between female characters and other characters, and the way women of color fight for their own right in *White Teeth* through analysing their dialogues with the analytical framework of negotiation (Martin and Rose).

This paper mainly contains three chapters. In Chapter 1, a literature review of *White Teeth* will be presented. In Chapter 2, an introduction of the analytical framework of negotiation will be given. In Chapter 3, dialogues containing voices of female characters will be analysed. The last part of the paper is the conclusion, in which the whole study is synthesized, the limitation of this study is discussed, and the implication of the study and direction for further study are provided.

## 2. Literature Review

*White Teeth* has been studied by many scholars from various aspects.

A large number of scholars focus on multiculturalism and hybridity.

Laura Moss proposed that the combination of two entities creates hybridity, which is a product of the interaction of cultures, communities, or individuals. And she contends that in *White Teeth*, hybridity is part of practice of everyday life.

Irene Pérez Fernández (2009) studied how characters in *White Teeth* negotiated a sense of belonging and identity. He argued that cultural diversity and hybridity were fully manifested in the characters in *White Teeth*.

Domestic scholars also emphasize multiculturalism. Qian Cheng (2005) investigated racial relationships and identity construction under the context of racial discrimination and revealed the confusion that whites and new immigrants in Britain face. Li Qiong (2007) pointed out different views held by three generations of immigrants towards national culture and identity, and how their views will change in multicultural time.

Some researches about *White Teeth* are books reviews and interviews with Smith.

Sara Nichols (2001) reviewed the plot of the novel, analyzed the theme and contended that the book is not about class, but about race. Liu Naiyin (2004) introduced *White Teeth* in *Contemporary Foreign Literature*. He discussed the cultural, generational conflicts in the novel and spoke highly of the novel. Ma Hongqi (2011) discussed the theme of “diaspora” and revealed social and political significance of the novel. Kathleen O’Grady (2002) interviewed Zadie Smith and discussed Smith’s sudden rise to literary darling and the vicissitudes of the writing process.

A small part of scholars has studied *White Teeth* from

the view of discourse. Xu Zhaoyang (2013) expounded the theme of cultural hybridity from the perspective of language use by studying features in sound patterns, vocabulary and grammar. He also interpreted the novel by analyzing the style of narration.

In terms of characters in *White Teeth*, most studies focus on male characters. According to Kathryn Fair Ledford (2008), many critics have focused on the male characters and have ignored the female characters. Therefore, she examined female characters’ relationship with men, the women of color’s relationship to each other, and a woman of color’s relationship to a white woman in Zadie Smith’s novels.

In summary, a majority of scholars have studied *White Teeth* from the perspective of postcolonialism, multiculturalism and hybridity, some of them wrote book review or had interviews with Smith, yet study on discourse is insufficient. In addition, it should be noted while most studies focus on male characters, study on female characters and the relationship between them is insufficient. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the roles assigned by female characters, the power relationship between female characters and men, and female characters’ relationship to each other through analysing their dialogues with the analytical framework of negotiation.

## 3. Analytical Framework

As mentioned earlier, negotiation has to do with interaction between speakers: how speakers adopt and assign their roles to each other, and how moves are organized in the conversation (Martin and Rose).

In this chapter, the negotiation system is introduced. Section 3.1 introduces the basic types of speech functions. In section 3.2, an explanation of how exchanges are sequenced as moves is given.

### 3.1 Speech Function

Language can indicate the status, position, attitude and motivation of a speaker as well as his judgement, evaluation of different things. People use language to communicate with other people, aiming to establish and maintain proper social relationships with them. This is the interpersonal function of language. By using the interpersonal function of language, the speaker involves himself into a certain context in which he expresses his attitude and evaluation and intends to affect others’ attitudes and behaviors.

When speaking, the speaker adopts himself for a particular speech role while he assigns to the listener a complementary role. For instance, when a speaker asks a

question, he wishes that the listener answer the question and provide the information; when a speaker states a fact, the listener acts as a role to receive his information. There are many speech roles in the act of speaking, but giving and demanding are the two basic ones. While speaking, the speaker is either giving something to the listener or demanding something from him. And the commodity that is exchanged between the speaker and the listener can be divided into two types: goods-&-services and information. Examples are showed in the following table.

**Table1.** Giving or Demanding, Goods-&-Services or Information

role in exchange	Commodity exchanged	
	(a)goods-&-services	(b)information
(i) giving	“offer” would you like this teapot?	“statement” he’s giving her the teapot
(ii) demanding	“command” give me that teapot	“question” what is he giving her?

(Halliday)

Generally speaking, offers and questions are realized by interrogatives, statements by declaratives, and commands by imperatives. However, the same speech function can be realized by different grammatical structures. For instance, “I need you to help me”, “Could I have a glass of milk?” and “Don’t make mistakes” are all commands, but the first sentence is manifested through the use of declaratives, the second one is realized by interrogatives, and the third by one imperatives.

### 3.2 Sequencing Moves

As Martin and Rose (2007) put it, exchanges contain one obligatory move. When negotiating goods-&-services, the obligatory move is the one that proffers the goods or performs the service; when negotiating information, the obligatory move is the one that provides the facts of the matter. Goods-&-services negotiations are known as action exchanges, and information exchanges knowledge ones. The person responsible for proffering goods or performing services is the primary actor (A1), and the person receiving the goods or having the service performed for them is the secondary actor (A2). The person who has the authority to adjudicate information is the primary knower (K1), and the person who receives information is the secondary knower (K2). Two-part exchanges are presented below:

Hendrik: A2 Could I have a bottle of your best dry red?

waitress: A1 - Yes.

When primary actors anticipate proffering goods or performing service, and primary knowers anticipate proffering information, the anticipatory moves are known as

dA1 and dK1 moves (with ‘D’ standing for ‘delay’). For example:

waitress: dA1 Wine?

Hendrik: A2 - Could I have a bottle of your best dry red?

waitress: A1 - Yes.

If the secondary actor or knower follow up, and there is a further follow-up move by the primary actor or knower, then ‘f’ is used to stand for ‘follow up’:

waitress: dA1 Wine?

Hendrik: A2 - Could I have a bottle of your best dry red?

waitress: A1 - Yes.

Hendrik: A2f - Thank-you.

waitress: A1f - Not a problem.

The dependent moves that clarify the ideational content of what is being negotiated is called tracking moves. They are labeled as ‘tr’ (for track) and ‘rtr’ (for response to track):

Llewelyn: K1 Coetzee’s here.

Sannie: tr - Pardon?

Llewelyn: rtr - Coetzee’s here.

Sannie: K2f - really?

The independent moves that resist the interpersonal thrust of an exchange is called challenging moves. They are labeled as ‘ch’ (for challenge) and ‘rch’ (for response to challenge):

Sannie: A2 You can come tomorrow, for tea.

Coetzee: ch - Are you sure about this?

Sannie: rch - I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t sure.

Coetzee: A1f - OK, I’ll come.

The moves adopted by the speakers can indicate the power relationship between them. The person in dominant position can manifest his/her power in dK1, K1, K1f, A2, A2f, and ch. The person’s deferential position can manifest itself in K2, K2f, dA1, A1, A1f, and tr. In the next chapter, the power relationships between different speakers will be revealed through analysing these sequencing moves.

## 4. Analyses of Sequencing Moves on *White Teeth*

In this chapter, the roles assigned by female characters will be investigated, the power relation between male and female characters, white female character and women of color will be analyzed. In addition, the women of color’s power relationship to each other is also revealed.

### 4.1 The power Relations between Male and Female Characters

Table 2 shows the moves mainly adopted by Alsana and Samad. It is found that most of Alsana’s moves are dom-

inant ones, but she also adopted moves that indicate deference, i.e. K2 and K2f. As for Samad, almost all of his moves indicate dominance.

**Table 2.** Exchanges between Alsana and Samad

speakers	dominant moves	deferential moves
Alsana	K1 A2 ch	K2 K2f
Samad	K1 ch	

A dialogue between Alsana and Samad is shown below. When Alsana and Samad were attending the weekly school council meetings, Alsana repeatedly adopted A2 moves to try to prevent Samad from raising his hand and expressing his opinion, which suggests that she attempted to fight for more rights in their relationship. However, Samad resisted to defer to her wish by making challenging moves such as “I will not put it down” and “Let go of me”. He also assigned himself as the primary knower to say “I have a right to an opinion”, which is followed by a K2f move by Alsana. Therefore, Samad is the person who dominates in the bilateral relationship, and sexism is thus manifested in these sequential moves.

Alsana	A2	Put your hand down.
Samad	ch	- I will not put it down.
Alsana	A2	- Put it down, please.
Samad	ch	- Let go of me.
Alsana	K2	- Samad, why are you so eager to mortify me?
	A2	- Put it down.
Samad	K1	- I have an opinion.
	K1	- I have a right to an opinion.
	K1	- And I have a right to express that opinion.
Alsana	K2f	- Yes,
	ch	- but do you have to express it so often?

As shown in Table 3, Millat gained dominance mainly by K1, ch, and A2 moves, while Irie mainly by K1, dK1 and ch. It is found that Millat adopted more dominant moves in their dialogues, while Irie adopted more deferential moves than Millat, suggesting that Irie is in a weak position compared with Millat.

**Table 3.** Exchanges between Millat and Irie

speakers	dominant moves	deferential moves
Millat	K1 ch A2	K2 K2f
Irie	K1 dK1 ch	A1 K2f

The following conversation took place when Millat and Irie slipped out of the house in order to feel the storm.

When Millat revealed that Irie fancied him, Irie denied it by taking a challenge move. However, when Millat positioned himself a secondary actor to ask Irie to fancy what their kids would look like, Irie deferred to his wish. In fact, she imagined it in a serious way. It reveals that Irie, in many cases, took dominant moves to hide her secret (that she loved Millat), but had trouble resisting his request because of her love for him. Therefore, the person who is loved is put in the dominant position.

Millat	K1	You want my arse.
Irie	ch	- Don't be a wanker!
Millat	rch	- Well, it's no good, anyway.
	K1	- You're getting a bit big. I don't like big.
	K1	- You can't have me.
Irie	ch	- I wouldn't want to, Mr. Egomaniac.
Millat	A2	- Plus: imagine what our kids would look like.
Irie	A1	- I think they'd look nice.
	A1	- Browny-black. Blacky-brown.
	A1	- Afro, flat nose, rabbit teeth and freckles.
	A1	- They'd be freaks! You can talk.
	K1	- I've seen that picture of your gran dad --

#### 4.2 The Power Relations Between the White Female Character and Women of Color

It is found that Joyce is absolutely in a dominant position in her relationship to Irie. Almost all of Joyce's moves are dominant ones, while a large amount of Irie's moves are deferential ones, which is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Exchanges between Joyce and Irie

speakers	dominant moves	deferential moves
Joyce	K1 ch K1f A2	
Irie	K1 Ch	K2f K2 A1

Before Irie came to know about her family history, she barely had her voice heard by the Chalfens: she spoke too little while the Chalfens spoke too much. In the following conversation, all the moves adopted by the Chalfens are dominant ones, while Irie only took K2f moves to express her admiration toward the Chalfens, nothing else. At that time, Irie lost herself in admiration towards the white culture.

Joyce	K1	Your headmaster knows how much I hate to see potential wasted that's why he sent you to us.
Jack	K1	- And because he knows most of the Chalfens are four hundred times smarter than him!
	K1	- Even Oscar is.
Oscar	ch	- No, I'm not.
	ch	- I'm the stupidest in the world.
Joyce	K1	- Oscar's got an IQ of 178.
	K1	- It's a bit daunting, even when you're his mum.
Irie	K2f	- Wow.
	K2f	- That's remarkable.

After Irie found her roots, her attitude towards Joyce changed dramatically. She began to doubt the white culture, to challenge what Joyce said, and she tried to make her voice heard. When Joyce told her about Doctor Marjorie's diagnosis of Millat's "disease", Irie made two challenge moves, which are shown in the following two dialogues.

Joyce	K1	It's simply essential that I talk with him if he rings.
	K1	- We're so close to a breakthrough.
	K1	- Marjorie's almost certain it's Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.
Irie	K2	- And how come you know all this?
	K1	- I thought Marjorie was a doctor.
	ch	- What the fuck happened to doctor-patient privilege?

In the dialogue above, Irie doubted the doctor-patient privilege in the white culture by speaking in a rude way. In the dialogue below, Irie spoke out her opinion about Millat's "disease" by denying that Millat did not get a disorder. In addition, when Joyce said that Millat and Magid need each other, Irie challenged her once again.

Joyce	K1	Because if Marjorie's right, and it is ADHD, he really needs to get to a doctor and some methylphenidate.
	K1	- It's a very debilitating condition.
Irie	ch	- Joyce, he hasn't got a disorder, he's just a Muslim.
	K1	- There are one billion of them.
	K1	- They can't all have ADHD.
Joyce	rch	- I think you're being very cruel.
	rch	- That's exactly the kind of comment that isn't helpful.
	K1	- Look. The most important thing is that I get the two of them to face each other.
	K1	- It's time.
Irie	K2	- Why is it time?
Joyce	K1	- It's time because they need each other.
Irie	ch	- But if they don't want to, they don't want to.

It is apparent that Irie was attempting to gain more power and fight for more rights for herself in her relationship with Joyce, however, it is Joyce who still held the dominant position, which can be explained by racial discrimination and class discrimination.

**Table 5.** Exchanges between Alsana and Joyce

speakers	dominant moves	deferential moves
Alsana	K1 Ch dK1	dA1 A1
Joyce	K1 A2 Ch	K2

Table 5 shows the moves mainly adopted by Alsana and Joyce in their conversation. It is surprisingly found that Alsana is in dominance from the perspective of sequential moves. The dialogue below was initiated by Joyce, but Alsana interrupted her by taking a series of K1 moves, warning Joyce not to interfere in her family business.

Joyce	K1	Mrs. Iqbal, I know we haven't been on the best of terms in the past, but-
Alsana	K1	- Mrs. Chalfen, there are two rules that everybody knows, from PM to jinrickshaw-wallah.
	K1	- The first is, never let your country become a trading post. Very important.
	K1	- If my ancestors had followed this advice, my situation presently would be very different, but such is life.
	K1	- The second is, don't interfere in other people's family business.
	dA1	- Milk?
Joyce	ch	- No, no, thank you.

In the following dialogue, Joyce said little while Alsana dominated in the bilateral relationship. Alsana blamed Joyce for splitting her sons apart and destroying her family by making a series of K1 moves. In addition, she took A2 moves, which indicate that she was trying to gain dominance when facing the dominant white race.

Joyce	K2	Leaflets?
Alsana	K1	- Leaflets. Leaflets about your husband and his ungodly mouse.
	K1	- Trouble brewing, yes sir.
	K1	- I found them, hundreds of them under his bed.
	K1	- He's disappeared again, three days.
	K1	- I have to put them back before he finds out they are gone.
	A2	- Take some, go on, lady, take them, go and read them to Magid.
	A2	- Show him what you have done.
	K1	- Two boys driven to different ends of the world.



### 4.3 Women of Color’s Power Relationship to Each Other

Table 6 shows that dominant moves adopted by Alsana include K1 and A2 moves, while Clara only adopted K1 moves to manifest power.

**Table 6.** Exchanges between Alsana and Clara

speakers	dominant moves	deferential moves
Alsana	K1 A2	K2
Clara	K1	K2f

The following conversation happened when Alsana and Clara were discussing how to deal with the Chalfens who had influenced their kids and their family. It can be seen from the sequencing moves that Alsana is more powerful in her relationship to Clara: she assigned herself as the secondary actor and required Clara to join her in dealing with the Chalfens. And Clara was not as decisive and powerful as Alsana, which can be seen from her saying “I got quite upset at first, but then I thought I was just being silly” and “Yes . . . I’m just thinking . . .”

Alsana	K2	Are you there, lady?
Clara	K1	- Yes, Yes.
	K1	- You see, Me, well . . . she seems to worship them.
	K1	- I got quite upset at first, but then I thought I was just being silly.
	K1	- Archie says I’m being silly.
Alsana	K1	- If you told that potato-head there was no gravity on the moon he’d think you were being silly.
	K1	- We get by without his opinion for fifteen years, we’ll manage without it now.
	K1	- Clara, we always stand by each other . . . I need you now.
Clara	K2f	- Yes . . . I’m just thinking . . .
Alsana	A2	- Please. Don’t think.
	K1	- I booked a movie, old and French, like you like two thirty today.
	A2	- Meet me in front of the Tricycle Theatre.
	K1	- Niece-of-Shame is coming too.
	A2	- We have tea.
	A2	- We talk.

Therefore, even within the community of women of color, power inequality still exists. This inequality is also concerned with racial discrimination. Clara, a black woman carrying Jamaican genetics, was discriminated by Alsana, a Bangladeshi, to some extent.

### 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the roles assigned by female characters, examined the power relations between male and female characters, between the white female character and women of color, and women of color’s power relationship to each other in *White Teeth* through analysing sequential moves in dialogues.

Here are the findings of the study.

Firstly, it is found that male characters are in dominance in their relationship with female characters. Although Alsana adopted A2 moves to gain power, Samad dominated in the conversation by challenging her and adopting K1 moves. In the relationship between Millat and Irie, Irie was in a weak position since she found it hard to resist what Millat asked her to do and deferred to Millat’s wish by taking A1 moves. Therefore, the exchange structure reveals that female characters suffer from sexism.

Secondly, in their relationship to the white female character, women of color experience the discriminations of racism and classism, but they tried hard to battle against these discriminations. When Irie lost herself in her admiration towards the white culture, she was oppressed by Joyce and barely had her voice heard; after she found her roots, she began to fought for more rights to speak by taking challenge moves and K1 moves. In Alsana’s relationship to Joyce, she managed to gain dominance by taking a series of K1 moves, in an attempt to gain confidence in words when facing the dominant white race.

Thirdly, within the community of women of color, racism also exists. Alsana had a prejudice against Clara, a black Jamaican woman. Her prejudice is manifested in her K1 moves and A2 moves, while Clara’s deference is manifested in her K2f moves.

This study revealed the power relations between different characters in *White Teeth* from the view of exchange structure in dialogues, and found language evidence for racism, sexism and classism that exist in the novel. However, the limitation lies in that only a part of dialogues in the novel have been examined. Since sequencing moves (or exchange structure) play a significant part in revealing power relations between speakers, more efforts can be made to investigate interpersonal relationship in novels from the perspective of exchange structure.

### References

- [1] Fernández, Irene Pérez. “Exploring Hybridity and Multiculturalism: Intra and Inter Family Relations in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*.” *Odisea.10* (2009): 143-54. Print.

- [2] Gustar, Jennifer J. "The Tempest in an English Teapot: Colonialism and the Measure of a Man in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Changing English* 17.4 (2010): 333-43. Print.
- [3] Halliday, M. A. K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.
- [4] Ledford, Kathryn Fair. "A Feminist Reading of Zadie Smith's Novels through the Critical Framework of Interlocking Oppressions." *The College of Charleston and the Citadel*, 2008. Print.
- [5] Martin, J. R., and David Rose. *Working with Discourse : Meaning Beyond the Clause*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007. Print.
- [6] Moss, Laura. "The Politics of Everyday Hybridity: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Wasafiri* 18.39 (2003): 11-17. Print.
- [7] Nichols, Sara. "Biting Off More Than You Can Chew: Review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *New Labor Forum*.9 (2001). Print.
- [8] O'Grady, Kathleen. "White Teeth: A Conversation with Author Zadie Smith." *Atlantis* 27.1 (2002). Print.
- [9] Xu, Zhaoyang. "Stylistic Analysis of Cultural Hybridity in Zadie Smith's Novels." Shanghai International Studies University, 2013. Print.
- [10] Liu Nayin. *Zadie Smith and her First novel White Teeth*. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*.3 (2004): 135-39.
- [11] Li Qiong. *On the Development and Trend of Ethnic Identity of British Immigrants*.
- [12] Qian Cheng. *On Zadie Smith's exploration of multiculturalism*. *Foreign Language Studies*.6 (2005): 76-79.